

California longboard event features downhill racers on 14-foot skis

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By BOB ECKER / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

JOHNSVILLE, Calif. – Picture racing down a slope at 40 mph balanced on 14-foot-long skis that can't turn, while holding a long pole between your legs as a brake.

That's what some early California gold miners did when they embraced downhill racing in the 1850s. This was long before organized ski racing took root in Scandinavia or the Alps.

Each year, the Historic Longboard Revival Series re-creates this quirky part of California history on a small public ski hill at the Eureka Bowl in California's Plumas-Eureka State Park. Anyone can watch or, if brave enough, enter this crazy race.

The events commemorate the first downhill race conducted in Johnsville in 1855. Using massive longboard skis, gold-seekers from rival mining camps raced one another straight down. (In contrast, modern racing skis are 6 feet or shorter.)

Racers in today's commemorative competitions must use similar longboards and wear period costumes. Women in the contest wear long skirts.

Spectators line the route or wait at the bottom of the hill. The lively scene includes bands with musicians playing accordions, fiddles, banjos and drums. Barbecues sizzle, cold beers are passed, and dogs play.

"I like the whole sense of community," says Sarah Craggs of Greenville, Calif.

Racers pay a small fee to rent longboard skis, crafted by the Plumas Ski Club, though some people make their own.

The only longboard racing rules, dating to mining days, are: "No spittin', no cheatin'."

Conducted in heats like a drag race on snow, two or three racers line up and are off at the sound of an old gong.

The huge, edgeless wooden skis don't turn, and racers brake with a long wooden pole held between their legs. Plumes of snow erupt as they try to stop at race's end. Although longboarders sometimes endure spectacular wipeouts, few serious injuries occur.

The Plumas-Eureka State Park is an old-fashioned ski hill. There are no lifts, and skiers park on the side of the



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Two longboarders race neck and neck down a slope at the Eureka Bowl in California's Plumas-Eureka State Park.

road and walk up to the ski bowl. Volunteers groom the hill by dragging big screens behind snowmobiles.

Though exciting, Western longboard racing didn't gain widespread popularity and was shunned by Europeans due to the rowdy nature of the American miners. The races disappeared when the mines closed.

Bob Ecker is a travel writer in California.

When you go

Race dates

Historic longboard races will take place Jan. 18, Feb. 15 and March 15 at Eureka Bowl in Plumas-Eureka State Park at Johnsville, Calif., about 65 miles from the Reno-Lake Tahoe area. Contact: www.plumascounty.org.

Where to stay

Chalet View Lodge in Graeagle (www.chaletviewlodge.com) is a multiuse resort near the ski hill. Additional lodging is available in surrounding areas.

Where to eat

- Grizzly Grill in nearby Blairsden offers casual cuisine. Graeagle also has restaurants and cafes.
- The rustic Mohawk Tavern, just down the hill, is where winning racers often celebrate.

Resource

Plumas Ski Club: www.plumasskiclub.org.